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Helping Guatemala: Organization of American States, Unit for the Promotion of Democracy, Mine Action Program in Central America (AICMA)

Because of the internal conflict during the 1980s, Guatemala's land is now littered with AP landmines and UXO. The OAS and the Inter-American Defense Board have developed an assistance program to help the country.

by Col. William McDonough and Carl Case, OAS

Background

As a result of Central America's internal conflicts of the 1980s, a significant number of anti-personnel landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) remain in the national territories of these countries. Estimates place the number of UXO remaining in Guatemala alone at about 7,000 to 8,000. In 1992 Guatemala, along with the other Central American nations, requested OAS assistance in addressing this problem. Initiation of an assistance program in Guatemala was delayed, however, until a series of peace agreements between the Guatemalan Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) were signed between 1994 and 1996. In accordance with the agreements, the National Congress issued Legislative Decree 60-95, establishing the framework for a national mine and UXO clearance program in support of the resettlement of formerly conflictive zones. Subsequently, the OAS, with technical assistance from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), developed an assistance program for Guatemala, which was launched in 1998.

Organization

Compared to others in Central America, the Guatemalan program is unique, not only because its emphasis is on UXO rather than mine clearance, but also because of its organization. Program activities are conducted under the supervision of a congressional commission, with operational direction provided by the Executive Coordinating Unit (UCE). The UCE includes members of the Guatemalan Army and the Volunteer Firemen's Corps, as well as demobilized members of the URNG. Because of the

heavy concentration of undetonated explosive devices found in many parts of Guatemala and the lack of a documented registry for them, extensive efforts are required to identify hazardous areas through an integrated mine risk awareness campaign. Under this concept, demining elements are organized into joint teams that visit villages in the affected areas to provide mine/UXO awareness information and to obtain information about the location of hazardous items from the local populace. A total of 100 Guatemalan personnel participate in these activities, along with three international supervisors who accompany the unit on operations.

Mine and UXO Clearance in Guatemala

Following the conduct of initial demining training courses under the supervision of the IADB, mine clearance operations were initiated in Guatemala in December 1998. In accordance with the Guatemalan National Plan for Demining and Destruction of Unexploded Ordnance, demining activities have been concentrated in the department of El Quiché, one of the most seriously affected areas of the country. Since the initiation of operations, more than 200 items of UXO have been destroyed, including several 250-pound bombs. In addition, 48 communities have been assisted, and more than 2 million square meters of land have been returned to productive use. The remaining departments of the country have been prioritized for future operations, which are expected to continue at least through 2005.

Since 1999 Guatemala has also provided military personnel to serve as part of the regional international supervisory team, known as the Mission Assistance for the Removal of Mines in Central America (MARMINCA). The international team, which is coordinated by the IADB,

provides technical advice, training and supervision of mine and UXO clearance activities in each of the four beneficiary countries in Central America (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua). In September 2000, Guatemala became the first beneficiary country of the Central American program to provide an officer to serve as the head of MARMINCA.

Mine Risk Awareness and Education

Mine awareness programs supported by the OAS aim not only to reduce the risk of death and injury by promoting safe behavior, but also to facilitate solutions to the high-risk behavior that we have noticed in some of the affected communities. The program recognizes the importance of increasing the involvement of affected communities in mine awareness initiatives. In the case of Guatemala, it is important to highlight the double benefit obtained by the participation of the affected communities in the landmine awareness activities. Not only do the community members learn about the danger of landmines, but in specific cases where no landmine records exist, the communities are also the main sources of information on the location of mined areas and explosive devices. Efforts to use local and national communications media are also supported by the OAS program in Guatemala. In that respect, the OAS program office in Guatemala received an award from UNICEF for a public awareness campaign it developed in October 2000 entitled "No juguemos con la muerte" ("Let's Not Play with Death").

Victim Assistance

The OAS supports a program that operates an independent living center, which is presently home to several disabled people, ranging in age from 14 to 35. In addition to basic medical treatment and counseling, they are also trained in independent living, a philosophy that states that with the right skills, tools and information, a disabled person is capable of caring for him or herself and leading a productive life. The program also provides services to the disabled community by offering counseling, case management, peer support groups and a resource library.

In the past year, the Guatemalan Rehabilitation Association helped edit and distribute the Regional Directory of Rehabilitation Resources. The directory provides information on existing rehabilitation facilities in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador, and it was developed jointly with the Center for International Rehabilitation, the Center for the Promotion of Integrated Rehabilitation, the Cooperative Association of the Independent Group for Total Rehabilitation, the Landmine Survivors Network and the OAS. ■

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■ Frederic Pic Chirox, right, and Geraldo Vazquez Munoz, left, along with eight other members of a group of ex-soldiers incapacitated by landmines during the war sit in the main plaza of Guatemala City. c/o AP